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ABSTRACT

Discipline--the most serious problem faced by teachers today--has consistently appeared at or near the top of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. This paper discusses the difficulty of discipline and one of the most perplexing problems facing administrators today--the use of suspension as a discipline alternative. Out-of-school suspension (OSS) offers only a temporary solution to maintaining order because of legal restrictions on its length. Moreover, such suspensions are likely to increase discipline problems. An in-depth examination of in-school suspension programs (ISS) is presented, including problems with ISS programs, some effective models of ISS, and specific ideas for program improvement. ISS programs have great potential for success; however, given the way they are currently implemented, they need to be improved. If properly designed and administered, with an evaluation phase, professional intervention by the counselor and administrator, and assignment requirements, ISS programs can go beyond mere eviction to accomplish something positive on behalf of students. ISS programs accomplish everything that OSS programs do--they remove the troublemaker from the class, but do not reward the student for bad behavior with a vacation from school. (Contains 41 references.) (DFR)

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Developing Effective In-School-Suspension Programs

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Discipline in America's schools has been characterized as a major concern of the general public for the last three decades.[1] Teachers continually report difficulty with discipline as a major stress in their job. The frustration of dealing with disciplinary problems has driven many teachers out of the classroom. Some have left the profession; others, ironically, have moved to administrative positions where they have responsibility for the discipline of an entire school instead of just one classroom.[2] One of the most perplexing problems facing administrators is the use of suspension. This paper will present information regarding the difficulty of discipline today and the use of suspension as a discipline alternative. An in-depth examination of in-school suspension programs will be presented, including problems with in-school suspension programs, some effective models of in-school suspension, and specific ideas for program improvement.

Discipline Today

Both teachers and school administrators agree that discipline is the most serious problem faced by teachers today.[3] Since 1969, Gallup polls have surveyed the public's attitudes toward the public schools. The results are published each fall in the *Phi Delta Kappan* journal. Lack of discipline has consistently appeared at or near the top until recent years, when it moved into first place.[4] This comes as no surprise to teachers in the field. They know first-hand the difficulties they experience on a day-to-day basis. Teachers can also tell stories of the various kinds of students they have in their classes: students from horrible homes, those with behavior problems, chronic misbehaviors, etc. Administrators themselves are at a loss at how to handle discipline problems most

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effectively and still meet the needs of students who each have their own special needs. Various types of suspension programs have been used to encourage students to behave appropriately at school.

In-school vs. Out-of-school Suspensions

Suspension, the temporary denial of the privilege of attending school, is a corrective measure frequently used in schools today. Most educators would agree that the right to suspend is a safety valve essential to maintaining order in schools, but they would also admit that it offers only a temporary solution because of the legal restrictions of the length of suspensions. Out-of-school suspension does temporarily seem to free the teacher to better attend to the needs of those students who choose to behave. However, it also seems evident that the policy of awarding vacations for bad behavior is transparently ridiculous even to the adolescents themselves and certainly does not lessen discipline problems when they return.[5]

Actually, the contrary seems true. Out-of-school suspensions are likely to increase discipline problems because of the frustrating effect of the returning student finding him or herself even further behind than when he or she was evicted from school.[6] Overall, educators agree that out-of-school suspension does little for students' educational achievement or their problem-solving skills. In addition, the time spent attending to legal requirements of due process consumes considerable administrative time with little gain.[7] As a disciplinary alternative, the practice of suspending or expelling students from school was originally intended to offer an alternative for teachers to temporarily dismiss violent or grossly misbehaving students from the class and allow those students an opportunity to cool down and reflect on what they have done.[8] Apparently, however, these rationales

are not always remembered because many students are suspended for nonviolent offenses that could just as easily have been resolved by their teacher. Suspension increasingly has become a more widely used tool for resolving conflicts between students and between students and teachers or other school personnel.[9]

Concerns have also been raised about the fairness of suspension referrals. Garibaldi's (1988) study revealed disproportionate numbers of African American male students were being suspended from that school system, even in the lower grades.[10] Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) also report a pattern of disproportionality in the administration of school discipline based on race, socio-economic status, gender and disability.[11] Other issues related to suspension concern the fact that it does not accomplish the goals of education. Ambrose and Gibson (1995) found that in their own middle school of approximately 500 students, out of 89 suspensions, 84 involved repeaters (students who were suspended at least once before). Fourteen were suspended twice, 10 were suspended three times, four were suspended four times, and two were suspended five times in one school year.[12] Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) also found that behaviors that led to office referral were primarily not those that threaten safety, but those that indicate noncompliance or disrespect. They also found little evidence of a consistent relationship between seriousness of offense and severity of consequence.[13] Some school systems employ alternatives to suspending students from school. One of the most common alternatives is in-school or in-house suspension.

The In-School Suspension Plan

In-school suspension is not a new way to deal with inappropriate student behavior. School systems have had a format and the basic components in place for quite

some time. Generally, in-school suspension (ISS) precedes out-of-school suspension or expulsion. Students are generally isolated in a room, work on regular assignments, and must adhere to a strict behavior code.[14] In-school-suspension programs are necessary in schools today. The program attempts to protect the overall learning environment by isolating disruptive students and protects the community by keeping the offending students off the streets.[15] Existing in-school-suspension programs have great potential for success; however, the way such programs are currently operating, they leave room for much improvement. Although current research on ISS policies and practices is limited, there is little evidence that supports its use at this time.[16] The cause of this seems to be the operation and implementation of the program. Sheets agrees that ISS programs *can* be effective and alter inappropriate behavior-if and only if they are designed in the correct way. ISS programs accomplish everything that out-of-school suspension does--it removes the troublemaker from the classroom; however, it does not reward the student for bad behavior with a vacation from school.[17]

Developing Effective In-School Suspension Programs

Researchers believe that if properly designed and administered, ISS programs can go beyond mere eviction to accomplish something positive on behalf of students.[18] As with any instructional program, it is essential to develop a philosophy that coincides with the school's overall educational philosophy. The foundation of the program should include a mission statement that explains clearly what the program does, where it wants to go and how it is important to the total school discipline policy. The development of this policy should be a shared responsibility among administration, faculty, and students. The final foundation component of an in-school suspension program is the development

of rules and procedures.[19] It is important to realize that it is a program, not a place. The ISS room should not be used as a holding area.[20]

The key operational component is the person assigned to monitor the program. No matter what in-school suspension model is used, the instructor will make or break the concept. Some researchers suggest that instead of serving as sergeant at arms, the adult in charge should assume the role of a supportive resource.[21] These researchers point out the importance of providing fail-safe relationships for students.[22] Rather than demanding respect and seeking to overpower defiant youth, adults become mentors in the youth's private campaign for respect and power.[23] As a mentor, the adult in charge can establish a personal connection with students, take an interest in them, express the belief that they are worthwhile, encourage them, and treat them with empathy and respect while still remaining firm.[24] There is no doubt that the person hired for the position should be a professional. Many researchers believe the person should have experience in counseling, social work, and special education (specifically the areas of learning disabilities and behavior disorders).[25,26] Others suggest refraining from the use of excessive verbal discipline. They suggest instead the more silent approach.[27]

Another key foundational element is isolation from the rest of the student population. This can be arranged by having a large, self-contained classroom to which suspended students are to report a few minutes before classes convene and from which they are dismissed a few minutes after regular classes are dismissed.[28] It is important to remember that although the room location should not be in the middle of the social circulation, it should not be so far from the office that the administration does not monitor it on a regular basis. It is easy to forget about the ISS teacher in this case.[29] Not only

should suspended students be isolated from regular students, they should also be isolated from each other in their special classroom. They should be seated as far apart as possible and should not be allowed to communicate with each other in anyway.[30]

Another major operating concern deals with student assignments. Teachers need to develop an operative procedure that is user friendly that teachers can use so that the ISS teacher can receive the assignments on a daily basis.[31] All assignments should be completed before a student is released. Even if he or she has served the prescribed number of days, the student must stay until he or she has completed every assignment teachers have for that time period.[32] Students should receive one assignment at a time and attach his or her work to the assignment sheet sent by the teacher. The ISS instructor checks the assignment for general accuracy and completeness and routes it to the teacher during his planning hour and after school.[33] Some schools have found success in the development of self-help packets placed in the ISS room. These self-help packets address values clarification, judgments, and decisions regarding the specific infraction that resulted in their placement. Study skills packets pertain to the student's academic courses.[34] In dealing with the tough issue of assignments, these basic operating procedures assist in creating an effective program.

Another key component of an effective program is professional intervention by the counselor and administrator. Counselors are not disciplinarians, but should be involved with small group counseling sessions and individual counseling sessions with chronic offenders. While few studies link improved student discipline with group counseling, many educators believe group counseling intervention with at-risk students can increase students' self-esteem and their awareness of self-defeating attitudes and

behaviors.[35] In a study conducted during the 1983-84 school year comparing students in group counseling to a control group, dramatic results were obtained. Weeks after the experiment, the control group (those who were not involved in the counseling), were 15 times more likely to be referred to the principal's office, 13 times as likely to be returned to ISS, more likely to be suspended out of school (none of the experimental group were suspended), and more likely to repeat the kind of behavior that led them to be assigned to ISS in the first place. In addition, the academic performance of control group students continued to decline while the grades of student in the experimental group stabilized. Attendance of the experimental group was also significantly better.[36] Counselors are not the only ones who should be directly involved with the ISS program. Administrators should visit on a daily basis by scheduling visits on their calendars. During these visits, administrators should sit down and talk with students in small groups about behavior, why they should change their behavior, etc.[37] Each of these elements assists in the operation of an ISS room.

As with any instructional curriculum component, the effective ISS model must have an evaluative phase. To be effective, the evaluation component must measure student behavioral change over time and determine if the objectives of the program are being accomplished. Written evaluation forms with areas for suggestions should be distributed to all staff and students involved with the model. Accurate record keeping and monitoring of student behavior after their stay in the ISS program is essential.[38] This evaluation of the program will help to ensure it is meeting the needs of everyone involved.

Conclusion

In-school-suspension programs have a great chance of being successful and changing the behavior of students if they are properly designed, operated, and evaluated. ISS is an effective alternative to traditional suspension. Suspension, as it's most often used in schools today is a "quick fix" intended more to relieve the frustration of adults than to address the needs of children.[39] Administrators would find it worth their time to develop an effective ISS program. Should a program serving a minority of students be given so much consideration? Absolutely, says Sheets (1996). In a truly effective school, the total discipline policy must be clearly defined and implemented.[40] Rehabilitation of offenders is the greatest good that could be accomplished on behalf of the total school population since discipline problems may well be the major barrier to excellence in our educational system.[41]

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